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Family Strategies, Inheritance Systems and the Care of the Elderly in Historical Perspective - Eastern and Western Finland

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Abstract: When structuring the famous North West European household system, Hajnal excluded Finland on the assumption that the household system in Finland in the 18th and 19th centuries varied radically from the Northwest European pattern and more closely resembled the one described as Eastern European (Hajnal 1965, 1983). Studies on local and regional level have revealed different family patterns not only in urban and rural environments but also in the countryside in the east and the west. In western Finland stem-families were common while in eastern Finland multiple family households with horizontal extension are frequently found. The origin of these differences can be traced to diverging systems within the framework of pre-industrial rural primary production. The economy created a favourable ground for specific arrangements of landownership and inheritance. Landless households in the east and the west were less complex in structure, and overall figures are largely affected by variation in social structure. The capacity of coping with old age changed over time. In the 18th century a large proportion of the elderly could be cared for within the stem or multiple family systems. However, the increasing social stratification in the 19th century placed many elderly people in a difficult position.

The more that is known about how families functioned in the past, the clearer it becomes, that for different types of societies and at different times families have developed strategies to cope with restraints put upon them, and have

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adapted to changing circumstances both in the ecological and the social sense. This is as true for rural as for urban societies and equally important in a pre-industrial as in an industrial environment. Finland is a country with late urbanisation and late industrial development. In the 19th century most of the towns were still clusters of habitation concentrated around market places or garrisons rather than urban centers in the European sense. At the beginning of the 20th century 80 per cent of the population was still active within the primary sector; the agrarian economy, and resided in the countryside. Because of this, an examination of everyday life naturally becomes a study of everyday life in the countryside and the circumstances that affected life in this kind of an environment.

Although a superficial observer would come to the conclusion that the household system in Finland in the 18th and 19th centuries varied radically from the Northwest European pattern and decidedly resembled the one described as Eastern European (Hajnal 1965), closer observations reveal great variation between different regions within the country.

In western Finland stem-families were prevalent and in eastern Finland multiple family households with horizontal extension are frequently found. The variation is clearly linked to differences in the conception of land ownership and inheritance originating in diverging economic systems. The variation between social groups was also considerable and regional differences are sometimes only a reflection of variation in social structure. Landless households were smaller with less inclination for intergenerational cohabitation.

The consequences for the care of the elderly of the diverging household systems were considerable. When growing old the living arrangements varied depending on social origin, sex and geographical setting. A larger proportion of the elderly could be cared for within the multiple family system, but the economic basis for the maintaining of such a system could not be kept up over time. The increasing social stratification in western Finland placed a larger proportion of the elderly in a difficult position, but a number of strategies for coping with the situation were also adopted.

Sources

In Sweden and Finland the 17th century brought an interest in the parishioners' knowledge of the central articles of Christian faith, resulting in documentation of people on individual and household level and of changes within the households. The registers (Communion books) were in use during five or ten-year periods and make it possible to follow households over time, when necessary in combination with the lists of births, deaths and marriages. The oldest registers go as far back as the 17th century, but many parishes do not

have continuous registration until the second part of the 18th century, and even then gaps can be found. The quality of the actual registration is good, having the communion books in order made it easier to keep track of the whereabouts of the parishioners and their church attendance. Apart from this the clergy was expected to record vital events in the parish and supply information for the population statistics.

1635 a new head tax was introduced, it had to be paid by all persons of working age (over 15 years) with some exceptions. People over 63 who claimed that they were supported by their children could also be excluded. The taxation records are listings of individuals within each household, because the head of the household was responsible for the payment by everybody who lived under his roof. The quality of the records vary from year to year but they are the only source of information, listing names of individual people during the early part of the seventeenth century.

Stem-family arrangements in the west

Western Finland was incorporated in the Scandinavian legal system at an early stage and the ease by which it was accepted indicates that there were similarities with the local pre-christian inheritance customs. Transfer of land on the male line favouring the eldest but in the absence of male offspring on the female line in age order was predominant. Severe restrictions existed on the selling of land outside the family. The individual was given the right to use the land but not to dispose of it. In case of a proposed sale relatives had to be asked before strangers and the transfer to a stranger was not ratified until it was clear that no relative was interested. In case of economic problems like inability to pay taxes for more than three years the authorities aimed at turning the land over to as close a relative as possible, preferably a son or a married daughter (Jutikkala 1958; Aarnio, Korpiaakko; Moring 1994, 57-63).

The transfer between generations was prepared during the lifetime of the parents by keeping the eldest child in the household and cohabiting with him and his family when he had married (Table 1). When the parents reached an age that prevented them from full-time engagement in the work-tasks of the farm, formal or informal retirement took place. The child who stayed and worked with his parents and took care of them in their old age was given the farm as compensation for unpaid work in his young years and the upkeep of the parents until their death. Although the law stipulated equal inheritance between siblings (daughters receiving half of a son's share if there was a male offspring) the land was not divided, those who left the parental home were given cattle, money, bedding etc. On the other hand the one who got the farm was also responsible for the upkeep of his younger siblings until they reached the age to marry as the control of the economic resources were in the hand of the

landholders (Probate inventories Korpo-Houtskär 1711, 1791-1825, Kumlinge-Brändö 1706-1738; Virtanen 1934; Virtanen 1949).

Table 1: Percentage of households including parents of the household head or the spouse of the head, south western Finland 1790-1895

	Korpo-Houtskär	
	Households with fathers	Households with mothers
1790	12,6 %	22,1 %
1809	3,6 %	19,8 %
1895 H	3,9 %	10,8 %
1895 K	2,5 %	6,7 %
	Kumlinge	
1790	19,6%	22,2 %
1859	15,2%	23,2 %
1895	10,7%	19,2 %

Sources: Tax-registers, communion books

In theory there existed a considerable difference between crown land and freeholds but in practice hardly any difference can be seen in questions of transfer except that crown land could not be divided even in theory.

This system guaranteed the upkeep of elderly landowners and their widows. In case the couple was childless another close relative usually cohabited and took care of them in old age receiving the farm in return (Jutikkala 1958, p. 191, 200-201; Aarnio 1991, p. 57-61; Pykkänen 1990 p. 362; Moring 1994, p. 56-63).

The eldest child generally married first bringing in his or her spouse. The younger ones could spend some time in the parental home even after marriage but they were generally married out of the house. Land hoarding was not accepted either by the authorities or the farmers themselves. If there were chances of the two halves to prosper, a farm could be divided between two married brothers, but heading more than one farm was impossible, once a son or a daughter married into another farm his or her destiny was tied to that unit. In situations when the siblings had departed and death struck the designated heir temporary strategies had to be adopted. If the widow was young and her children small remarriage would be a natural solution, even in cases when the parents in law (or one of them) were still alive. The need for an adult male in

the household while the children of the first marriage were minors was universally recognised. If a man lost his partner while of active age he generally married again, the mistress of the house had an important position in the household supervising women's work which comprised more than just household tasks (Moring 1994, p. 63, 82-86).

The average age of the brides of widowers in Houtskär in the 18th and 19th century were 35 years and the average age of bachelors marrying widows was 37 years. In general remarriage was a phenomenon connected with younger age groups. 38 percent of the widowers and 62 percent of the widows who remarried did it before the age of 40. The average age of all men remarrying in Houtskär between 1738 and 1811 was 44,8 and that of the women 38,8 (Moring 1994, p. 82-87). When the second marriage resulted in children, the rights of the children of the first marriage were not questioned. The compensation given to a man who provided work for the farm during his most productive years and thereby securing the livelihood of a number of people to whom he was not related, was the right to be taken care of in his old age by the step-son or step daughter who eventually took over the farm. Equally the obligations to the parents of the first husband had to be kept up; housing, food, clothing etc. until they died (Tax registers, family reconstitution Houtskär).

Ergo in the landholding group the upkeep of the elderly was arranged through intergenerational cohabitation, generally with one married child only (Table 2).

Although married brothers and sisters cohabited in southwestern Finland in the 17th century the system had become quite rare by the 19th. In Korpo-Houtskär the majority of the multiple households were vertically extended. In the neighbouring Kumlinge 27% of the households included two married couples in 1790, less than 1 percent consisted of coresiding married siblings. Although the number of multiple family households was still as high as 22,4% in 1859 only 2,5% were horizontally extended. Unmarried adult brothers and sisters were frequently staying on in the parental home for some time but marriage generally took the younger siblings out of the household. The siblings who did not marry stayed on with their brother or sister working without receiving any payment but in return being taken care of in old age by nephews or nieces (Communion books and tax registers Korpo-Houtskär; Moring 1994, p. 88-93; Moring 1996 p. 102-107).

A study of the household structure in the region shows a considerable proportion tre-generational households. Over time the proportion of landless increased in the area, as did the proportion of over 65 year olds. The changes in social structure caused a shift in the proportion of extended households in the area. The landholding population kept to the old system but with an increased number of formal retirement contracts while the landless generally formed neolocal nuclear households (Table 5; Gardberg 1948; Moring 1996).

Table 2a: Household Structure in Korpo-Houtskär 1686-1895.

Percentages									
Year	1	2	3	4	4a-b	5	5a-b	N	w.s.
1686	3,2		39,1	19,0	11,1	38,6	31,6	189	72,6
1700	1,2		47,0	18,7	9,6	33,1	21,1	166	61,4
1770	5,0	1,8	51,3	19,2	16,8	22,7	20,9	339	38,6
1790	13,9	0,2	48,1	21,4	18,7	16,3	14,8	411	37,7
1809	9,4	3,6	55,3	18,7	17,0	13,0	13,0	470	27,9
1859	9,8	2,2	64,4	11,7	5,6	7,1	3,4	728	23,2
1895	15,9	0,5	62,0	13,7	11,5	6,9	6,1	1003	12,4

Sources: Korpo-Houtskär Tax registers, parish registers Communion books. Classification Lasslett-Hammell+ cath.
w.s.=households with servants.

Table 2b: Household structure in Kumlinge-Brändö percentages

Year	1	2	3	4	5		w.s.
1740	2,9	1,9	35,0	19,4	36,9	100 %	31,1
						103	
1770	3,9	-	32,8	35,6	27,7	100 %	38,4
						177	
1790	1,1	-	39,3	31,4	28,3	100 %	35,1
						191	
1809	3,3	0,4	48,4	30,8	17,0	100 %	38,2
						252	
1859	2,1	3,8	43,2	25,9	23,8	100 %	31,0
						290	
1895	5,6	0,8	51,4	29,5	12,7	100 %	16,3
						393	

Sources: Tax registers Kumlinge.

The landless and the poor-relief system

The situation of the landless was very different from that of the farming group. The landless had little to give to their children in compensation for the care in old age. The more numerous the landless group the larger would be the number of landless widows present in society (Table 3).

Table 3: Residence patterns Korpo-Houtskär, south western Finland

	Households headed by widows		Tot
	Landholders	Landless	
1790	3,9 %	8,7 %	12,6 %
1809	1,2 %	9,6 %	11,1 %
1859 H	6,8 %	7,6 %	14,4 %
1895 H	2,5 %	5,5 %	8,2 %
1895 K	4,2 %	9,0 %	13,2 %

Sources: Tax registers, communion books.

Table 4: The percentage of widows and widowers in Korpo-Houtskär 1775-1865

	Percentage of tot.pop	N	Female	Male
1775	5,3	132	112	20
1780	5,7	140	111	29
1790	8,5	206	154	52
1805	7,1	197	159	35
1810	7,4	208	167	41
1830	7,2	226	182	44
1840	7,1	227	171	56
1860	8,8	242	173	69
1865	9,4	294	195	99

Sources: Population tables Korpo-Houtskär.

Table 5: Population by age in Finland and the south west, percentages 1775 and 1900

ages	1775		1900	
	Finland men	Finland women	Finland men	Finland women
0 -14	38,7	7,3	35,2	33,9
15-29	26,6	26,4	26,8	25,9
30-44	18,0	18,3	17,7	17,5
45-64	13,0	13,4	15,7	16,8
65-	3,8	4,6	4,6	5,9
	Houtskär		Houtskär	
	men	women	men	women
0 -14	32,9	32,5	28,7	28,0
15-29	29,4	24,9	26,5	26,1
30-44	19,1	20,2	20,5	17,7
45-64	14,9	16,9	17,4	20,3
65-	3,8	5,6	7,0	7,9

Sources: Population tables, Stierncreutz 1958.

In 1790 the landless widows could be primarily divided into two groups, young widows with children or old widows, often inmates, residing alone. In addition to this some widows of craftsmen can be found. In some cases these people did reside on their own in small huts on the land of the farmers, sometimes even the huts were owned by the farmers. Often the inmate resided on the actual premises of the farmer forming a separate household. In these cases the farmer had taken in the inmate because of charity or obligation - there being some form of remote kinship tie, or because the person had been allotted to the farm through the poor relief system.

In 1895 the group of landless widows had been inflated by crofters' widows residing in the crofts handed to the family through a crofting contract (Jutikkala 1958; Gylling 1909 p. 177-180; Soininen 1990). The crofters' widows were by this time almost as many as the widows-inmates. In some instances there is information about the widows residing in a separate hut on the land of a farm or the village (cottars). The poor relief system in the late 19th century was still of the same type as in earlier centuries. The primary care was secured by relatives close or remote. Small monetary payments could be received to cover people over short periods of crisis but long term destitution made you a parish pauper. These were fed and clothed at the different farms and circulated from the one farm to the other being taken care of for a specific time at each place.

In rural Finland the first poor houses were started in the 1890s and in the majority of areas not until the early 20th century.

Eastern Finland

The eastern finnish concepts of landownership, transfers and inheritance were deeply inbedded in the local economic structures, and might also partly have been influenced by the proximity of Russia. The economic basis for settlement in the area had originally been a total reliance on burn-and-beat agriculture. While the proportion of people in relation to woods suitable for this type of use was relatively small the only limits for expansion were connected with the size of the work-force. The larger the work-group the greater the area one were able to clear for cultivation. The wealth of the household was therefore dependant on the number of grown-up men in the unit. The size of the land under cultivation could also vary from year to year. Measuring prosperity on long-term basis was indeed difficult and the system that developed within this economic framework was viewing all adult men in a household as having an equal share of crop, money and tools while women were excluded from ownership connected with agriculture. The share was based on input of work and could therefore be taken out if one decided to leave the household. Likewise it was possible to join another household bringing in the share of tools, money and grain one had taken out from the previous household. Once a

share was taken out from, for example, the parental household, no more claims could be made for the assets of the household in question. Ergo, a son who had left could not return when the parents died to get a share, everything was divided between those who resided in the household at that time. On the other hand, if he married a girl and worked and resided in the household of her parents his share would be equal with that of her brothers. If a couple was childless or all children died or departed, the children of sisters and brothers could be kept in the household or total strangers could be taken in receiving the legal status of sons (Jutikkala 1958, p. 55-57; Letto-Vanamo 1995, p. 159).

Although the relative importance of burn-and-beat agriculture had decreased considerably by the 19th century and set field agriculture had strengthened its position, the inheritance customs were not altered.

Daughters were generally married out of the household receiving a dowry in the form of money, cattle or textiles. Unmarried daughters were supported in the parental household after their parents death by their brothers or uncles. Where a family had only daughters the sons-in-law could be taken into the household (Table 6). The relative frequency of horizontally extended households weakened the position of women though, because even if their father was head of the household and they had no brothers it was likely that he could be succeeded by his brother and not by the daughter's husband (Jutikkala 1958, p. 55-57; Pykkänen 1990, p. 191-192; Mäkelä 1989, p. 187).

Carelia or the province of Viborg has been considered the area par excellence for large multiple households or joint families. The patterns of residence were patrilocal and the age at marriage for women in the 1750ies was less than 22 years slowly rising in the 19th century.

A large proportion of the households was either extended or multiple during the second half of the 18th century, in the 17th century as many as 60% were extended or multiple in some parishes. The MHS in the province of Viborg was ca. 8 in 1723 and 7 in 1864.

The household structure among landholders was dominated by joint residence by fathers and married sons and of married siblings, married cousins sharing households was relatively rare though. The usual time for transmission of headship was at the death of the older generation (nostaminen), widows with grown-up sons could be heading households, although more commonly they were residing with relatives under the headship of a brother or an uncle (Pykkänen 1990, p. 319).

The headship was transmitted either to a son, brother or son-in law but the household could contain several married brothers. In 1818 14% of the households in the parish of Virolahti contained three or more nuclear families related to one another and 16% contained married brothers. In case there was hope of partitioning of the land leaving was an unwise move because once you had left it was difficult to return. Even remaining as a younger brother gave you a certain status in the local community (Table 7).

Table 6: Household structure in Virolahti, Eastern Finland 1818-1876, percentages

	Solit	No fam	Nucl.	Ext.	Mult.	Other	N
1818	2,8	2,8	34,8	12,0	45,2	2,4	250
1838	3,8	2,6	37,7	10,9	41,1	3,4	265
1851	5,0	1,8	36,7	13,0	35,8	6,8	338
1876	7,3	1,7	47,7	16,7	25,7	0,2	478

Sources: Taxation records, communion books

Table 7: Coreidence of relatives in relation to socio-economic status of household head

Percentage of households, Virolahti 1818-1876				
	Grandchild	Married son	Married brother	N
Farmers				
1818	27,2 %	24,6 %	21,0 %	195
1838	23,6 %	21,5 %	26,1 %	195
1876	30,5 %	30,5 %	14,1 %	249
Inmates				
1818	2,9 %	-	-	36
1838	4,4 %	4,4 %	-	45
1876	3,6 %	4,3 %	-	138
Crofters				
1818	14,0 %	14,0 %	-	7
1838	15,4 %	15,4 %	15,4 %	13
1876	14,3 %	17,4 %	3,2 %	63

Sources: Tax registers

Table 8: Mean household size in Virolahti 18181-1876

	Farmers	Inmates	Crofters	Craftsmen	All hsh.
1818	9,1	3,3	7,0	6,7	8,4
1838	10,0	3,4	7,6	4,4	8,6
1851	9,4	3,9	6,2	3,3	8,0
1876	8,1	3,5	4,7	5,1	6,2

Sources: Tax registers

The close kinship is a firm tie within the households and the size of the units made it possible to accomodate non-productive as well as productive members, the household head and his wife could look forward to a safe old age but also brothers sharing households and their widows had a guaranteed upkeep when the productive capacity had diminished.

When examining the size and composition of the households in Virolahti we can clearly see that the large and complex households are primarily those of the farmers and these are also the households in which you find coresident married brothers. The coresident married sons are numerous among the farmers but more rare among the other groups and accordingly the presence of grandchildren is highest among farmers.

Over time there is a numerical and proportional increase in the landless groups with the result that the mean household size in the parish decreases and the number of nuclear households increase. But there is also a fall in the size of the farmers' households and a fall in the proportion of horizontally extended household groups (Table 8 and 9).

Table 9: The presence of relatives in the households of Virolahti

	Mothers	Fathers	Brothers marr.
1818	21,3 %	1,2 %	16,4 %
1838	10,6 %	0,2 %	20,3 %
1851	5,6 %	0,4 %	
1876	6,7 %	2,7 %	7,7 %
	Sisters marr.	Sons marr.	Daughters marr.
1818	2,8 %	23,8 %	7,4 %
1838	3,8 %	18,2 %	5,7 %
1851		28,6 %	4,0 %
1876	0,8 %	20,7 %	2,5 %

Unmarried sisters in 16,4 1818, 13,5 1838 and 10,5 1876.

Sources: Tax registers

One of the main reasons for these changes was the economic shift from burn-and-beat agriculture to set field agriculture because of the increasing scarceness of woodland resources during the nineteenth century. While the one was absolutely labour-intensive the other was so only in the initial phase. An intensification of other economic pursuits, like butter production became important but dairywork was only done by women. The need for large household groups for economic reasons decreased and the ability of the

households to supply what was needed through inner recruitment increased. The need for additional male labour on contract basis or of a seasonal kind also disappeared (Kaukiainen 1987 p. 271, 277, 281; Soininen 1974 p. 382-385; Karste-Liikkanen 1968, p. 119-136).

The landless

By the end of the 19th century the possibilities for economic expansion in the east had come to an end. The farms had become more or less stationary. The surplus children could not expect a future in the parental home. Thecrofting system (introduced earlier and more effectively in the west) ameliorated the process of social downslide but the children of inmates had little hope for upward movement.

There was a rapid increase in the landless, 25 percent of the working men at the end of the 19th century and 40 percent at the beginning of the 20th were landless in Virolahti. In the province of Viborg 55% of the population was landless in 1912 and almost 90% of the landless population consisted of cottars, inmates and lodgers, a large proportion of which were young and married. The disappearance of the burn-and-beat agriculture decreased the supply of seasonal work and the pauperisation in eastern Finland attracted the attention of the authorities. While there was a need for the inmates on seasonal basis within the production, there was also a tendency to assist them when they reached old age but when the non-productive part of the society grew, attitudes became more strict.

There were large numbers of landless at the turn of the century in other parts of the country but they often at least had a roof over their heads. The inmates in eastern Finland »loiset« were dependant on other people providing them with a corner in their house or the right to live in an outbuilding (Favorin 1992, p. 115-119, 176-177, 182-192; Kaukiainen 1987, p. 281; Soininen 1974, p. 390-394).

Conclusion

Western Finland

The survival rate of women in comparison with men did prepare the society for the existence of women without partners and the grandmother was an expected and integrated part of the farming households. The number of tasks that could be performed by older women who had aquired skills over a long life were considerable. Even when enfeebled by old age, spinning of yarn for fishing tackle could be undertaken in addition to taking care of young children and cooking (Törnroos 1980). The cohabitation between the generations was not sprung upon anybody it was part of a long-term process.

Widowhood as an experience was not uniform but varied depending on the time of life this change occurred, it also varied from one social group to another. A woman in this society must not be seen as helpless or dependant. Legally she might never be equal with a man but if her life was affected by a number of restrictions so were those of men.

When a woman gave up a farm to her son, she remained in the household as a person with rights, and in theory also the owner of half what the farm contained in the form of livestock, household goods, money, tools and textiles. The residence continued together, literally, but during the 19th century sometimes a special room was allocated to the widowed mother of the head.

Those who are familiar with David Gaunt's work know that he claims that the retirement contracts in the Nordic countries come into being because of tension between generations and the need for the old generation to safeguard their interests while under pressure from the young. He also bemoans the fact that so few contracts can be found from earlier times (Gaunt 1983).

At the end of the 18th century and the early 19th century the first provisions were made in Sweden and Finland for making it possible for the farmers to buy back crown land that had once been in their possession. The process was largely a phenomenon of the latter part of the 19th century, when the terms were made really favourable. At the same time the birth-right was limited to a closer kinship group instead of the old concept of comprising whoever could prove an even remote relationship. The long-term results of these changes were that a land market came into being. The farms could go out of the hands of the family and into those of virtual strangers for the first time.

In this situation there was a tremendous increase in retirement contracts in Sweden and Finland. The old generation could not be sure that the person in charge of the farm would be a close relative and a retirement contract then became necessary to secure their position. An examination of the wording of the contracts reveal these concerns. Specifications like »If the farm remains in the hands of my son x, the payments to me and my wife will be reduced at the death of either of us, if the farm has been turned over to strangers no reduction takes place.« Sometimes there were specifications that in case of a purchase the payments in the contract would have to be increased by 25 percent (Hbgns 1938, p. 48-50).

In some areas a separate building was erected for the retired couple by the end of the 19th century. Most land transfers still stayed within the family but people were safeguarding themselves in case changes would take place.

The landholding group could in general look forward to a safe old age but the landless were in a more precarious position. The crofters' widows could sometimes share household with an adult child, and the widow with a cottage was perhaps able to struggle along until the productive capacity disappeared and it became necessary to rely on others.

The multiple family households with coresiding brothers created a system with considerable capacity for taking care of the old. The head of the household never retired but died as head. Old brothers and uncles also generally stayed in the household all their lives and their widows remained there unless they remarried. As long as the resources allowed it most male children could be kept in the household and their future was secured. Land-clearance and farm-division postponed the moment when the farmers had to see their children facing social downslide.

Multiple family households transformed into stem families on the lines of the other parts of the country, one son took over. The need for a large work-force diminished as the non-availability of woodland resources made a change in the economic system necessary and new units could not be created *ad infinitum*. A prudent marriage pattern took its first hesitant steps. The girls in Virolahti born in the 1890s married at the age of 25 and gave birth to between three and four children (Notkola 1989, p. 76). A shift in the patterns that had taken place one hundred years earlier in the south-western parts of the country. Society was divided in two and the landless group grew rapidly. The instability in work opportunities outside the farming sector brought with it a painful adjustment process. The poor-relief system had been of the traditional kind until the 1850s. The old and frail without relatives were taken in by the farms in turn, and those in need of temporary assistance got grain or money from the parish three times a year. Between 1839 and 1867 restrictions were put on the in-migration of paupers. The idea of a poor-house was not popular in Virolahti parish but by persuasion from the state poor-relief inspector the institution was established in 1902. It resulted in a temporary disinclination to seek assistance and the poor-house mainly catered for the old and feeble and some orphans. The hope of diminishing costs for the poor-relief did not come true and the treatment of the paupers cannot be described as better than before. The elderly inmates were marched off to the poorhouse (Favorin 1992, p. 188-192).

The different household systems in eastern and western Finland produced a variation in the capacity of caring for elderly people. The landholders in the west could look forward to a safe old age. In the eastern parts of the country not only the old household heads but also their close relatives were reasonably well protected to as late as in the latter part of the 19th century. The landless were in a more difficult position. Where the children were able to obtain a croft or keep that of the parents, an elderly mother could be provided for. Even sliding into the cottar group, with a hut to live in, a pig and some chickens, could prove a reasonable existence for an old widow. The rapid social and economic changes in eastern Finland brought about a major social problem with an inflated landless group totally dependant on the charitable disposition of others.

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